DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 886 PS 017 530

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TITLE Building Curriculum for Young Children: Deciding on Content.
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Criteria; *Curriculum Development; *Decision Making; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Philosophy; *Elementary School Teachers; Guidelines; *Preschool Teachers; Teacher Role; *Values Clarification
IDENTIFIERS Philosophic Mindedness; *Process Analysis; Questions; Theoretical Analysis

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to assist early childhood teachers in developing curriculum content by considering the philosophical issues that surround the curriculum decision-making process. Curriculum development is construed in terms of a multi-step decision-making process through which teachers progress. Steps of the process are: (1) formulating a conceptual philosophy; (2) defining curriculum; (3) organizing information into units; (4) selecting topics; (5) assessing the relevance of content; and (6) determining how the selected content should be presented to children. Discussion of most steps includes questions for teachers to consider or criteria for them to employ when making curricular decisions. The process approach to curriculum development described in the paper assumes that early childhood educators, even at the beginning phases of teaching, know more about their own profession than they think they do. Educators maintain theoretical positions and perspectives on development. They are the best source of fundamentally sound and developmentally supportive information and experiences for young children. In addition, early childhood teachers are the best articulators of their own position if they are given opportunity and conceptual tools for refining their ideas. (RH)

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Building Curriculum for Young Children:

Deciding on Content

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Running Head: Curriculum

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assist teachers of young children in developing curriculum content by clarifying theoretical and value perspectives. Several steps for guiding teachers through a decision-making process are proposed with ideas for prioritizing and clarifying content and information presentation.

Finding resources for teaching young children is not particularly difficult given the vast numbers of books, magazines articles, pamphlets, and guides suggesting various activities/experiences/experiments/songs/finger-plays/etc. The issue of prioritizing for many teachers and deciding on content, however, remains unresolved for many working with young children. How can teachers best organize material so it reflects their own preferences for teaching, is developmentally appropriate (see NAEYC, 1986), and presents information in a logical, sequential, and wholistic manner?

The primary step in preparing for this understanding (and it is a process) is to review one's perspective on a number of issues: teaching, curriculum, organization, and evaluation. These issues are central to making a decision about curriculum selection and design. Teaching staff for a variety of reasons (e.g., program conditions; staffing patterns; age grouping of children; variations in development level of children) prefer to develop their own teaching curriculum. Another response, and one utilized by many teachers and programs, is to use prepackaged or commercially produced curriculum and lesson plans. Given the variety of approaches, philosophies, rationale, etc. of practitioners and learned educators how should teachers formulate their own curriculum?

A key factor in being able to make clear decisions about curriculum is to identify the values worth considering in teaching (Hendrick, 1986). Such an approach entails a review of what you want children to be like, what content is realistic for the developmental level of the children in your group, what prior knowledge, processes or skills are needed to attain the desired goals in learning, growth, and development, and most importantly, is

what you have planned (and the methods you have selected to transmit this information) worthwhile for children to learn at this point in their lives (Seefeldt and Barbour, 1986; Spodek, 1977).

The purpose of this paper is to assist teachers in developing content by considering the philosophical issues that surround the curriculum decision-making process. The components of this decision-making include: clarifying a conceptual base; defining a curriculum; considering units as an organizational format; selecting topics; assessing content; and presenting material.

Formulating a Conceptual Philosophy

A conceptual philosophy is best defined as a teacher's philosophical or theoretical approach to: how children learn; what they should know; and what the teacher's role is with respect to children's learning and development (Hendrick, 1984; 1986; Eliason and Jenkins, 1986). Such a philosophy may be well known to a teacher or it may be somewhat more vague. It is important teachers be able to personally (and professionally) articulate their own conceptual philosophy. While formulating a philosophical position may be difficult, the process will clarify values, priorities, and perspectives (Radomski, 1986). A cloudy, "feely" orientation may result in teaching from a "hidden curriculum" (e.g., what is on paper does not match how it is implemented). Articulating a clear philosophy brings curriculum development from an uncertain and short-term orientation to one that may be more easily explained to others and subsequently contains long-range, growth-oriented priorities for children (Peters, Neisworth, and Yawkey, 1985).

How can a teacher develop a philosophy? One approach is to answer the questions which assist teachers to understand, and thus clarify, how they approach teaching/learning experiences and for young children. A "beginners" list of ideas for thought might include the following general questions:

1. How do young children learn and grow?
2. How do children acquire feelings about themselves? How do their feelings affect their ability to learn and function?
3. What role do parents and families play in their child's learning and growth?
4. What is the primary objective of early education programs for young children and who should determine what children should learn?
5. What information do children acquire from teachers as teachers and from teachers as people?
6. If you were able to help children learn only 3 pieces of information/ understanding in a year, what would they be?

(Adapted from Seefeldt and Barbour, 1986; and Spodek, 1977.)

Teachers may not need highly structured responses to these questions, but they should be aware of: (1) the interdependent nature of the issues addressed by these questions; (2) their own personal perspectives in responding to these ideas; and (3) their professional responsibility to articulate a balanced and clear position on their own responses to these questions.

Defining Curriculum

One major question which must be addressed is the definition of curriculum. For most early childhood teachers, a curriculum may be best

defined as a dual-purpose tool: a planning document for implementing activities and experiences in teaching young children, and a construct or framework for helping teachers formulate and organize their own mental priorities and information for teaching (Hendrick, 1984; 1986). For many, curriculum exists both as a process (e.g., developing long range teaching goals) and as a product (e.g., a lesson plan). It is important that prior to deciding what to teach, teachers decide what their perspective on curriculum is - process, product, or both.

Organizational Formats: Units and Themes

The primary organizational method for curriculum for most teachers is to think (conceptualize) in terms of units. Teaching units (e.g., theme or topic units) are tools for teachers to use. As such they may serve two purposes: to assist teachers to "intellectualize" about what they want to teach, and to serve as a vehicle for converting (e.g., organizing, information and activities) that understanding into a set of experiences (suitably "translated") appropriate for the learning abilities of young children (Meyen, 1981).

The purpose of organizing information into a unit is to make the information relevant to children. The strength of a teaching unit lies in the selection of the topic and subject matter. The selection of subject matter is the concern for most teachers as this tends to be a more function of what a teacher knows about a topic (and is told is important by an array of specialists and publications) than by the relevance and importance of the units possibilities for transmitting information.

Selecting Topics

Selecting subjects for teaching units may be made on the basis of several criteria: (1) topics generated by the play and interests of the children; (2) topics related to the acquisition of concepts (e.g., transportation, colors, safety); (3) topics related to understanding characteristics (e.g., things that (are) round; tall; old; new; change); and, (4) subject matter or skills deemed important for children to acquire by consultants, assessment findings, and priorities for school entry . It is valuable in selecting topics to develop a profile or systematic picture of how these may build on or complement one another throughout the year. This profile is important particularly if teachers have the same children enrolled in their programs for more than a single teaching year.

Topics should be selected with consideration to: (1) the goals of the program; (2) the values, preferences and cultural/ethnic priorities of the adults responsible for the children's development (teaching staff and parents); (3) applicability of the subject matter to a wide range of developmental abilities; (4) building children's conceptual understanding across a variety of domains (verbal; problem-solving; comprehension; classification; identification; etc.); (5) relevance for assisting children in understanding their environment and gaining skills to manage this environment; and 6) daily schedule demands and adequacy of physical resources.

Assessing Relevance of Content

Assessing content must begin with an eye on how the subject matter can be used (and reused) given the pragmatics of working with children and staff

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on a day-to-day basis. A topic may appear to "fit" within an overall schematic design but is too narrow, too broad, or abstract to be of value. Many times teachers may feel obligated to teach subject matter because it meets the basic criteria for suitability. The actuality of transmitting information to and designing experiences for children may find teachers frustrated and/or anxious about making the topic "work." One approach is to ask the following questions as a means to further evaluate the "useability" of topics for teaching:

(1) What are the reasons for this particular unit at the present time?

(2) What contributions do you think covering the material will make to the children's development?

(3) What are your (the) general objectives for teaching the selected topic?

(4) What specific facts need to be presented?

(5) What information is to be shared (both directly and indirectly) to the children?

(6) What resource activities/experiences and/or people would be appropriate in teaching the material?

(7) What "target" words should be taught in relation to the topic? (What words can be most easily taught using the activities as support for these words?)

(8) What primary information-processing skills are necessary for children to participate appropriately in acquiring the desired information?

(Hendrick, 1984; 1986; NAEYC, 1986; Seefeldt and Barbour, 1986)

Determining Presentation of Material

A final consideration to making a decision about what to teach is determining how the content should be presented to children. Teachers must assume there are underlying concepts best presented in a sequence of learning opportunities which range from general to specific (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). The presentation of information should build a hierarchy of interrelated clarifications, identifications, facts, observations, and experiences designed to tap the variable learning abilities of children who have not yet developed formal literacy (Connolly and Bruner, 1974). Information must be presented to the children with a clear idea as to where they "fit" into the process of learning and with an understanding of why this information is relevant to their need to clarify and organize their impressions of the world. The four areas to consider in curriculum content include:

The general means for presenting information include formal teacher-directed experiences in large groups (circle times), small groups, and one-on-one situations, and observational/problem-solving experiences which result through carefully planning and as a response to the spontaneous understanding by children. The presentation of information must consider the type of material - concepts, facts, clarifications, etc. with respect to the context of teaching. Teachers may wish to consider a three step process to formulate ideas for presenting the material they have selected to teach (Lawton, 1986). As a final note, the receptive language capabilities and developmental abilities of individual children should be considered when presenting the options noted above. In selecting a format for learning teachers may wish to consider the following (Collier and Kalk, 1986):

1. Are the pictures/objects familiar to the children, relevant to their learning needs and to their environment in and out of school?
2. Does the child have the necessary preskills to acquire the information?
3. Are the words and phrases used to describe the lesson and materials familiar to the child? Are they culturally accurate and appropriate?
4. Is the method of teaching - lecture, discussion, questioning, inquiring, etc. appropriate for the cultural learning style and developmental level of the child?

Summary

The material presented in the previous paragraphs is indeed complex and requires time for consideration. The process of questioning and clarifying professional perspectives is a responsibility given to many early childhood educators, guidelines for developing such perspectives, however, do not always include ways for looking at the applicability of theoretical positions. The intent of this paper has been to assist teachers in the technical aspect of making decisions about curriculum topics by providing a process for examining values on why teachers teach, how teachers teach, and what teachers teach to young children. This approach assumes that early childhood educators, even at the beginning phases of teaching: know more about their own profession than they may be aware of; do indeed maintain theoretical positions and perspectives on development as they impact learning; are the best source of fundamentally sound and developmentally supportative information and experiences for young children; and finally, are

the best articulators of their own position if they are given opportunity and constructive processes for refining such ideas. It is important that the ways we interact with young children and the experiences (e.g., curriculum) we provide reflect not only our caring and interest but also reflect careful thought, understanding, and articulation of decision-making which has resulted in a clear, solid, final product: a developmentally sound curriculum. Developing professionalism in curriculum development comes from thoughtful attention to the needs and capabilities of young children and the integration of self-knowledge and acquired information to be delivered in ways which best represent both of these qualities.

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